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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2007

Draft report

Addendum

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II. Meetings management/improved utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities

B. Meeting statistics of United Nations organs and consultations with/letters to bodies concerning utilization of conference services available to them

Introduction and overview

1. At its 484th meeting, on 10 September, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences containing statistical data and analysis of the planned and actual utilization of conference resources allocated to a core sample of bodies that met in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in 2006 (A/62/161 and Corr.1, paras. 23-34 and annex I). The overall utilization factor at the four duty stations had decreased from 85 per cent in 2005 to 83 per cent in 2006, reaching the same level as reported in 2004. The number of cancelled meetings with interpretation had declined, however, as well as the overall time lost due to late starts and early adjournments, as a result of improved advance planning and coordination with secretariats. The overall utilization factor had remained above the established benchmark of 80 per cent.

2. The Committee also heard an oral report by the Chairperson on his consultations with five intergovernmental bodies that had utilized less than the applicable benchmark percentage of their allocated resources, with the goal of striking a balance between the efficient substantive work of those bodies while rationalizing their use of conference-servicing resources. There had been positive developments as a result of targeted meetings with bodies that had not used all their resources, including an increased awareness that they should not take their entitlements for granted and a genuine desire to make the best possible use of the conference services provided.

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3. Solutions suggested during those consultations included improving accuracy at the planning stage in forecasting the number of meetings requiring interpretation; opening meetings on time, including waiver of the quorum rule; suggesting discussion of other items or holding informal consultations with interpretation if time remained; avoiding the unpredictable cancellation of meetings; maximizing the option of scheduling informal consultations with interpretation services; and scheduling shorter meetings if it is anticipated that interpretation services will not be needed for the full duration of the meeting.

4. Three intergovernmental bodies that had previously underutilized conference-servicing resources had reached or surpassed the established benchmark of 80 per cent in 2006 as a result of careful planning and ongoing dialogue with conference services. Two major factors directly linked to decreased utilization were meeting cancellations and time lost owing to late starts and early endings. Accordingly, the Chairperson proposed three options to improve efficiency, namely, writing a short letter on behalf of the Committee to the chairpersons of all committees requesting them to pay greater attention to avoiding late starts and early endings, reflecting that phenomenon in the draft resolution and requesting members to discuss those factors with their regional groups and States.

5. The Chairperson suggested that the most effective way to improve the utilization of conference services was a three-pronged approach. The Committee on Conferences and its Chairperson, acting on its behalf, should conduct consultations with chairpersons, particularly incoming chairpersons, to inform them of the relevant guidelines and recommendations concerning the use of conference-servicing resources; the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management should continue its proactive approach with "underutilizers" at the planning stage; and intergovernmental bodies should improve their planning and organization of work by being more realistic in their requests for conference services.

Discussion

6. The view was expressed that a balanced approach must be taken, bearing in mind the prerogatives of intergovernmental bodies regarding methods of work, rules of procedure and scheduling of sessions. The intensive consultations between the Chairperson and the secretariats of underutilizers had yielded good results and should continue.

7. In response to a request for clarification on how the utilization factor was calculated, a representative of the Secretariat explained that early endings of meetings posed less of a problem than late starts. At the initial planning stage, all meetings were assumed to be three hours long, but with advance notice, if a meeting was expected to be shorter, the utilization factor could be adjusted accordingly. In the same way, if the remaining time was used for informal consultations with interpretation, for instance, the utilization factor would not be affected.